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George Bush and the Old Boy Net

WHEN GEORGE BUSH was under examination by the Senate for confirmation in his present post as director of the Central Intelligence Agency, some concern was expressed about his lack of experience in the intelligence business. True, he had previously been ambassador to the United Nations and had just given up his post as U.S. representative to the People's Republic of China. But he had also been, not to put too fine a point on it, political. He had been chairman of the Republican National Committee and had run for the Senate after serving as a member of the House of Representatives from Texas. Apart from the question of whether a once-practicing politician was quite right for the job of CIA director, there was worry about how he would fit in.

Well, the answer seems to be that he is fitting in just fine, judging from some remarks he made the other day at a gathering of retired intelligence officers. In fact, he sounded like a charter member of what might be called the CIA's "old boy net." The agency, he reported proudly, had "weathered the storm" of congressional investigation that had swept over it in the last three years. "The mood in Congress is changed," he went on to say. "No one is campaigning against strong intelligence. . . . The adversary thing, how we can ferret out corruption, has given way to the more serious question of how we can get better intelligence." There is, however, still one problem, Mr. Bush reported, according to an account of his remarks in this newspaper. No fewer than seven congressional committees now must be alerted in "timely fashion" to impending CIA covert operations, under a new and stricter system of oversight that replaces the cozy, intimate and demonstrably ineffective arrangements that allowed the agency to run amok for more than two decades. And the result of closer oversight, the CIA director complained, is that "now, weight is given to the risk of disclosure" before the agency intervenes one way or another in the internal affairs of foreign countries as agent of the government and, by extension, the people of the United States.

We think Mr. Bush is right on one point: The mood of Congress has changed. But we part company with him on his reading of what has happened to congressional attitudes toward the CIA. For the change, in our view, has very little to do with the pros and cons of "strong intelligence"—very few, if any, members of Congress

were ever "campaigning" against that. And if Mr. Bush thinks they were—or that the congressional investigations were some "adversary thing" to "ferret out corruption"—then the lesson of the last three years has been lost on him. It was not corruption but atrocities and abuse of power and the wholesale repudiation of fundamental values and principles that so profoundly troubled the CIA's serious critics in Congress. And the change in Congress' mood, we suspect, derives in part from evidence that self-correction, exposure and reform have brought an end to the worst of the agency's past excesses, and in part from heightened confidence (considerably short of complete) that improved oversight will prevent those excesses from recurring.

Right there, on the question of oversight, is where we really part company with Mr. Bush. For what he sees as a bother ("now, weight must be given to the risk of disclosure"), we see as a positive blessing. We would not recommend wholesale disclosure of the details of operations that can pass the test of serious congressional oversight and that require secrecy in order to be effective. But it does strike us as not a bad idea at all for CIA officials, as they dream of projects to singe a dictator's beard, or to blow up a prime minister, or to poison a reservoir, or to buy up the legislators of some foreign land, to have to think seriously about how it would all look in public testimony before Congress. What is so wrong with their having to pause and ponder how this or that clandestine act would square with public expectations of the way the U.S. government should comport itself? This could, after all, be a means of bringing public opinion to bear, however hypothetically or subconsciously, on these sensitive and controversial activities in the formative, planning stage. And under our system that seems to us to be an altogether healthy thing.

We are disappointed that Mr. Bush apparently does not agree, because we actually were not among those who thought his political background was automatically disqualifying for the CIA directorship. On the contrary, it seemed to us at the time that a man who had sought and held elective office might be more than ordinarily sensitive to the real nature of public anxieties about the CIA. It doesn't seem to have worked out that way, which may say something about the agency's capacity for captivation that the congressional overseers ought to keep firmly in mind.